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Comprehension and Interpretation

I will explore some relations between my account of content preservation and the accounts of radical translation and interpretation developed by W.V. Quine and Donald Davidson.¹ I center on Davidson's account, and concentrate on epistemic issues.

Quine and Davidson claim that theorizing about understanding a foreigner's words from scratch is a good model for theorizing about understanding one's communal fellow's words, and indeed all linguistic understanding. Quine writes, "radical translation begins at home". Davidson writes, "All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation".² Both can see differences in the two cases as well as anyone. Still, they maintain that similarities are what are important in principle, or for theoretical purposes. We need to get straight about the principles and purposes.

Quine and Davidson motivate using the radical situation as a model for understanding all speech by considering coming to understand a language.

Quine writes,

We have been beaten into an outward conformity to an outward standard; and thus it is that when I correlate your sentences with mine by the simple rule of phonetic correspondence, I find that the public circumstances of your affirmations and denials agree pretty well with those of my own....The case of the linguist and his newly discovered heathen...differs simply in that the linguist has to grope for a general sentence-to-sentence correlation that will make the public circumstances of the heathen's affirmations and denials match up tolerably with the circumstances of the linguist's own.³

Davidson writes, "...what evidence plausibly available to a potential

interpreter would support the theory to a reasonable degree?". He continues, "To deal with the general case, the evidence must be of a sort that would be available to someone who does not already know how to interpret utterances the theory is designed to cover..."⁴.

I think that the line of reasoning is this. People understand what others say. Since they must start from a position of not knowing whatever language they learn, and since it is possible to understand a foreigner from scratch, this understanding must rest ultimately on non-linguistic evidence--evidence that does not already involve a construal of words. One must use a person's relations to an environment and the person's behavior as evidence for what the person's words mean. So a general theory of linguistic understanding should explain how one could get from non-linguistic evidence to linguistic understanding in any given case--even the hardest case. Communication among people who know one another, or who speak the same language, uses a mixture of contextual evidence and entrenched assumptions. But these assumptions go back to past, publicly available non-linguistic evidence. So fundamentally, the domestic and radical situations are the same.

Since Quine (in absentia) and Davidson (viva voce) were my most influential teachers, this original and fruitful line was basic to my education in philosophy. It is clearly on to something. But it passes over important distinctions. Use of the term "evidence" to cover the innate background, the training, and the contextual bases for understanding is a case in point. I believe that one must distinguish, more sharply than the radical inter-

pretation model does, differences between the psychology and epistemology of understanding. Quine blurs the distinction on principle. I am less certain how Davidson views it.

Davidson's aim in developing a theory of interpretation is different from my aim in investigating the epistemology of linguistic understanding. Davidson presents his account as a rational reconstruction, explaining neither the actual epistemology nor the actual psychology of communication. The account is meant to explain one way that someone could understand another.⁵ It thus answers to the Kant-like question "how is linguistic understanding possible?", where the answer may give one of various possible ways. Although it is supposed to represent what an interpreter knows (presumably the truth conditions of sentences understood), it is not meant to explain how he knows it. Thus it is not assumed that an interpreter actually has, even tacitly, the truth theory that the model outlines.

Davidson's account of the relevance of his theory to actual psychology is sometimes elusive. He counts interpretation theory a "model of the interpreter's linguistic competence", adding that "claims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory are not...claims about the propositional knowledge of an interpreter, nor are they claims about the details of the inner workings of some part of the brain."⁶ There follows this difficult sequence of statements:

They [claims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory] are rather claims about what must be said to give a satisfactory description of the competence of the interpreter. We cannot describe what an interpreter can do except by appeal to a recursive theory of a certain sort. It does not add anything to this thesis to say that if the theory does correctly describe the competence of an

interpreter, some mechanism in the interpreter must correspond to the theory.

If the radical interpretation model is a claim about what must be said to give a satisfactory description of competence, it is not clear wherein the model concerns only our descriptions of interpreters' competences rather than the structure and content of the competences themselves. Perhaps Davidson is being non-realist about psychological descriptions generally. But if he is not (as I am certainly not), it seems to me that anything that must be said to give a satisfactory description of the competence of the interpreter is a true description of part of the competence of an interpreter.

I see no difficulty in principle in taking truth-theoretic interpretation systems to correspond to actual psychological structures. The competence described is certainly not explicit, conscious, knowledge. Whether the theory would describe a basic psychological system for understanding others seems open. It could describe a system superimposed on a basic system only when an individual develops concepts of truth and reference. I believe that communicators understand utterances from the beginning by associating them with truth conditions--with intentional content that sets conditions on what it would take to make them true. It is an open question whether the semantical concepts are ground-floor concepts (either innate, or present as soon as communication is), or whether they are later conceptualizations of non-conceptualized operations that assign truth conditions.⁷

As long as the best psychological accounts continue to treat the competence as a computational mechanism, Davidson's approach may well have a

place in psychological theory. My epistemic picture will be broadly compatible with truth-theoretic interpretation systems taken as a structures of a psychological competence, possible or actual.⁸

Even where Davidson considers epistemic warrant, his project is orthogonal to mine. He asks what evidence would suffice to make linguistic understanding possible. I ask what warrants underwrite actual understanding. For all its value for other purposes, the interpretation model is likely to mislead as regards this question.

Davidson's rational reconstruction emphasizes similarities between domestic and radical cases. I believe that the domestic and radical cases are epistemically very different. The differences can be usefully developed by first considering differences between standing and contextual elements within domestic understanding.

There is a traditional and worthwhile distinction between elements of linguistic understanding that are "standing" or "constant" within an individual's repertoire and elements that depend on "context". Logical constants, common nouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives are items in one's language or idiolect whose understanding does not depend in a linguistically systematic way on the context in which they are used. Indexicals, tense, demonstratives, proper names depend for a primary aspect of their construal on a context of use. There are constant elements in the context-dependent devices, and contextual elements in the constant ones. But at our level of description, these reminders will suffice.

Context can figure in another way in understanding, as Davidson has

emphasized. One can use constant aspects of one's language to yield meaning in context that is at variance with or supplemental to one's ordinary understanding. Irony, humor, metaphor, conversational implicature, and speaker meaning are cases in point.

Whereas understanding contextual devices commonly depends essentially on background knowledge and generalized intelligence, standing linguistic understanding is commonly a specifically linguistic competence. Of course, in understanding even standing aspects of language, one relies on a background of belief about non-linguistic matters. And in acquiring linguistic understanding, one must rely on attitudes about non-linguistic matters. But I assume, with backing from empirical psycholinguistics, that linguistic understanding is in part a distinctive ability.

As a way of developing epistemic implications of this distinction between standing linguistic understanding and contextual understanding, I want to go over some familiar ground in the epistemology of perceptual belief. One can justify perceptual beliefs. One can justify one's perceptual belief that there is a brown lectern, by saying that one knows that one has a perceptual experience as of a brown lectern (or alternatively that one has stimulations commonly caused by brown lecterns), that one has checked one's perceptual apparatus and insured that no sources of illusion are in play, and that having such experiences under such conditions makes it reasonable to believe that there is a brown lectern in front of one. But this routine is not routine. The individual need not even be able to go through it to be warranted in perceptual beliefs in ordinary circumstances.

To be warranted in one's perceptual belief, one normally need not refer to--or be able to refer to--experiences, seemings, stimulations, ordinary conditions, possible sources of error, or the like. One need not be able to justify one's perceptual belief at all. One is normally warranted in one's perceptual belief straightway, without reason, evidence, or justification. In my terminology, one is entitled to the belief without raising questions about it, unless specific contextual grounds for doubting it arise. Entitlement is an epistemic warrant that need not be available to the warranted individual. The individual need not even have the concepts to explain the warrant. Entitlement thus contrasts with justification, including unarticulated but operative justification, the kind of warrant that involves evidence or reason accessible to the individual on reflection. One can be warranted in one's perceptual beliefs, without being able to justify those beliefs, and even without having the concepts to do so. Such warrant requires having perceptual experience, but it requires no reference to it. Experience does not function as evidence which the individual need think about.

Ordinary understanding of constant aspects of words used by another person is, I think, in this way analogous to ordinary perception. In neither case is evidence or justification needed for warrant. The point is not that justification is unconscious. It is that justification need not even be conceptually available to the individual on reflection. The warrant for the understanding does not rest on an unconscious transition from a reason or evidence. Nor is the warrant a matter purely of coherence with

other beliefs. The reliability of the competence (in perception or understanding) is the main source of the individual's warrant. One develops a competence to take in what other people say, when they use words one shares with them. Unless specific contextual grounds arise for doubting one's understanding, one is entitled to it.

Talk of evidence and theory is misleading here in the way that it is in talking about ordinary perception. Perceiving the words and behavior of the interlocutor need be no more evidence for understanding, in ordinary cases of smooth domestic communication, than stimulations or sense impressions and the background conditions for perception are, ordinarily, evidence for perceptual beliefs. In both cases, what would mistakenly be called evidence is part of the causal enabling conditions for having and exercising the competence. The sense-perceptual presentations or experiences contribute to the individual's warrant. But they do not do so by being reasons or evidence that the individual needs to have conceptualized as such, or needs to refer to. Sophisticates can think about experiences as reliable signs of the physical objects the perceptual beliefs are about. But such meta-inferences are supplementary justifications, at best. The fundamental perceptual warrant is an entitlement that does not go through such inferences. Similarly, with understanding. We can reconstruct an inference from perceptual beliefs about words and behavior to our understanding. But such an inference would be supplementary. The basic warrant for distinctively linguistic understanding is an entitlement that rests on the content and reliability of our non-inferential understanding.

Of course, the psychology of understanding depends on perceiving words and having some mechanism that assigns them meaning. The psychology of perception depends on having sense impressions and having some complex mechanism that assigns, perceptual content to those impressions. In both cases, psychology may describe the mechanism in computational terms. But it is a mistake to take psychology as itself an account of our warrant for (entitlement to) perceptual belief or standing linguistic understanding. For the points about an individual's subsystems do not track the individual's reasons.

Wherein lie one's entitlements to perception and ordinary linguistic understanding? The general pro tanto entitlement to perceptual belief resides in one's status as a perceiver, and one's default entitlement to presume on that status. Being a perceiver necessarily involves certain reliabilities in perceiving normal perceptual objects in normal circumstances. The entitlement derives from reliabilities coded in the causal, transformational, and presentational conditions that are constitutive of being a perceiver, and in the workings of the perceptual system. The same point applies to linguistic understanding. Being an understander necessarily involves certain automatic reliabilities in understanding expressions. Warrant resides in the reliabilities encoded in this cognitive competence and in the exercise of the competence.

All the preceding pertains to standing linguistic abilities applied in normal domestic cases. To understand many context-dependent devices one must exercise different abilities. To understand the application of the

demonstrative in "That is beautiful", one must normally find the physical referent and note the angle of perception on it. One's standing linguistic competence will not suffice for understanding the utterance. In this case, exercise of non-linguistic perceptual abilities seems integral to the understanding.⁹ There is the second class of contextual elements to consider. Here also, understanding involves assignments of meaning that commonly go beyond standing linguistic competence. In understanding conversational implicature, for example, standing competence is supplemented with reasoning about the speaker's intentions.¹⁰ This case is analogous to cases in which one has contextual reason to doubt one's perceptual presentation of an object, and one must invoke further evidence to be justified in forming a belief.

So I distinguish two sources of justificational force or warrant. First, there are entitlements deriving just from applying standing cognitive abilities. One is immediately though defeasibly entitled to a perceptual belief or to understanding aspects of an utterance. Then, second, there are warrants that derive partly from contextual, non-linguistic supplementation of such entitlements.

How does Davidson's position on evidence relate to this picture of the epistemology of domestic communication? Since Davidson intends his remarks as an idealized account of psychological input and psychological structure, my epistemic points might be seen as entirely compatible with this approach.

But even on this irenic construal, I think that the interpretation model underplays differences between radical and domestic cases. The

radical case is a matter of theory development until the foreign language is learned. We use an already mastered language to interpret forms over which we have no competence, by thinking about words as objects to be theorized about. In domestic cases, we are competent with the same words our interlocutors use. The vast preponderance of the time, we presume on understanding the speaker's words as he or she does.

In the domestic case, we do not use evidence much to understand what another says, except to correct or supplement the standing mastery that we already have. Normally we need not scrutinize the behavior of a stranger who uses words familiar to us. When we talk on the phone, or when we read, we have no new world-word relations and little or no non-linguistic behavior to rely upon. The standing mechanism yields an enormous amount of understanding. It is so reliable that the unsophisticated are slow to recognize verbal disputes. In treating the radical and domestic cases alike, interpretation theory passes over epistemic differences associated with the reliability of linguistic competence.

The interpretation model's portrayal of word-world, behavioral, and psychological facts that go into fixing content as evidence does have application to idiolect variations, tongue slips, irony, conversational implicature. Davidson fixes on malapropism in domestic communication because it maximizes analogies between the domestic and foreign cases.¹¹ But malapropism is not the norm. The norm in normal linguistic communities is taking one's homophonic understanding for granted. Things go wrong often, but not significantly so in comparison to their going right.

No one need disagree with this. But there is danger, even for an account of competence, in taking the abnormal as a paradigm of the normal. Since I am not centering on psychology, I will not ask how far assimilating ordinary communication to interpretation might distort psychological theory.

Let us pursue the epistemological issue. On a natural extrapolation of the interpretation modal, domestic communication is like radical interpretation except that the evidence used in standing understanding is held over, unconsciously, from past cases. In past cases, one is justified because one rested understanding on behavioral and environmental evidence. What grounded past understanding grounds understanding of new interlocutors who sound similar, unless there are reasons to call this background evidence into question. So in communication that smoothly treads well-worn paths, one need not attend to contextual evidence about what standing elements in speech mean.

One doubt about this empirical-theorizing model derives from the unlikelihood that many have grounds that support the inferential justification that the theory postulates. Competent neophyte understanders have no inductive-explanatory reason to think that if a stranger makes sounds that they have previously understood, the stranger is likely to mean what others meant by those sounds. Yet competent, neophyte understanders seem warranted in relying on unreasoned understanding of strangers, until things go wrong. There is no doubt sociological evidence that underwrites such an inference. But many do not have it, and they do not seem to need it to be warranted in presuming on understanding.

One could avoid appeal to inductive-explanatory evidence and invoke the idea of justification through coherence with other things one believes. But we seem to be warranted in understanding single utterances by strangers out of the blue. Here, coherence carries little weight. In most cases, any of a wide range of interpretations is equally coherent with everything we know.

Some of one's standing understanding derives from training during a period in which one lacked a language or theory. Assimilation of this background to evidence used in the radical situation is especially problematic for epistemology. The point applies not merely to past behavioral and word-world evidence. It extends to perception of the words themselves. All our exposure to what the empirical-theory account treats as "evidence" goes into the formation or exercise of our competence. But not all of what goes into how we gained the competence enters into the justificational basis for our understanding of utterances. This was a lesson of the comparison of understanding with perception. The fact that sensations, or irritations of our nerve endings, play a necessary role in mediating our perception of objects should not lead one to conclude that they play the role of evidence for our perceptual beliefs. Much of what the empirical-theorizing model counts as "background" evidence in the interpretation of strangers is merely part of the formation conditions or enabling conditions for our linguistic competence.

I would like to distinguish two kinds of understanding.¹² Let us label them "comprehension" and "interpretation". Comprehension is understanding

that is epistemically immediate, unreasoned, and non-inferential. First-person comprehension is the minimal understanding presupposed in any thinking, in beings that understand their thoughts at all. (I believe that animals think but lack comprehension of what they think, since they lack a third-person perspective on thought content.) One thinks a given intentional content, and comprehends that content and its force in thinking it. What one comprehends is not ordinarily thought about. Of course, one can comprehend meta-thoughts that take thoughts or thought contents as their referential objects. But normally one comprehends thought contents that apply to other things.

I include words, in a derivative sense, as things one can comprehend in the first-person way. One comprehends the words in one's idiolect as one uses them. The comprehended words are the direct expression of thoughts one comprehends. They express one's thoughts without mediation of further words or thoughts.

Comprehension in the third-person way is understanding that is epistemically immediate, unreasoned, and non-inferential and that carries no presumption that the comprehended material is one's own. It may be one's own. But it is comprehended without relying on taking it as one's own immediate or remembered product. I shall shortly discuss whether one can have third-person comprehension of others' thoughts and words.

Interpretation involves taking what is interpreted as the primary object of epistemic interest. Interpretation arises out of there being a question or issue about how to understand a candidate object of

interpretation. Interpretation is always from the third-person point of view. I conjecture that it is always epistemically inferential. What one interprets may be a thought content, or it may be words. It may be directed toward one's own products as well as those of others. But in interpreting, one necessarily carries out the interpretation of the object of cognitive interest in terms of thoughts one presumes--and is entitled to presume--one comprehends.¹³

The distinction is a functional one. It concerns one's epistemic starting point. One must comprehend something to interpret something else. One cannot comprehend something that is interpreted until it no longer functions as object of interpretation. What one comprehends is a content one can take for granted.

In saying that the distinction is functional, I am allowing that it is relative. What one comprehends could become an object of interpretation if some question arises about the comprehension. But to pursue such a question, one must use other contents that one presumes to be comprehended. However fluid, the distinction is fundamental and inevitable. A critical reasoner must presume comprehension of some intentional content to engage in any thought, including any interpretation. Interpretation, by contrast, does not inform all thinking. So the understanding that I call comprehension is functionally basic.

First-person comprehension can be criticized as more or less good. One can worry about whether one's understanding is flawed or incomplete. This is a constant theme in philosophy. But it occurs in the progress of science

and in ordinary life. Learning more is not always sharply separable from enriching or even correcting one's comprehension. Our thought contents are fixed by a web of inferential and applicational connections. The inferentially associated thoughts which help fix the meaning or content of our thought contents make substantive and fallible commitments. Although no one capable of any comprehension at all can fail to comprehend their own thoughts--in the sense that minimal, unreasoned understanding of the thoughts is necessary to thinking them--, the quality and depth of the comprehension can vary. Minimal comprehension can be infected with erroneous commitments. Improvement of comprehension can utilize self-interpretation. It can involve regarding the comprehension as an object to be reasoned about from the point of view of an outsider. Or it can utilize the sort of critical, elaborative reflection on conceptual connections that stays within a comprehended point of view.

My primary claims do not depend on holding that first-person comprehension can be better or worse, though the argument I have just given shows that it can be. What I want to insist on here is that even minimal first-person comprehension falls within the broad domain of norms and warrant. This point derives from two sources. One is the insight--variously developed by Kant, Frege, Wittgenstein, Quine, and Davidson--that understanding is essentially associated with inferential, applicational, explicational abilities. These abilities involve propositional commitments that may be true or false. The other source is Quine's insight, richly developed by Putnam, that even the most fundamental propositional summaries

of meaning or understanding are about a subject matter, can be true or false, and are thus subject to epistemic norms.

What is the nature of our warrant-our entitlement--to first-person comprehension of our thoughts and words? The entitlement is non-sense-perceptual--apriori. To be apriori a warrant's justificational force must be independent from contributions to that force from sense-experience or sense-perceptual belief. Apriority concerns the force of a warrant, not its vulnerability to criticism. Some beliefs that are apriori warranted are subject to empirical correction. As traditional rationalists noted, a warrant can be apriori or non-sense-perceptual even if sense-experience is necessary for the acquisition of the understanding involved in the warranted cognitive abilities. For a warrant to be apriori it is enough that sense-experience and sense-perceptual belief not contribute to its force.

I believe that we have an apriori pro tanto entitlement to our minimal comprehension of our own thoughts and words--the sort of comprehension necessary to think or use them at all. Unless some specific reason arises to question comprehension, we are warranted in relying on it; the force of the warrant does not derive from sense experience. Let me motivate and provide an argument for this claim that the entitlement is non-sense-perceptual. The issue of rational warrant that interests me arises for non-modular attitudes and capacities of beings with minimal understanding. The relevant attitudes and capacities require minimal understanding--comprehension. In the relevant cases, such beings must presuppose comprehension of an intentional content (and words directly expressing the content) in

taking anything as an object of cognitive interest. So all rational warrant for the relevant attitudes requires as a necessary condition that such minimal understanding is in place. Such rational beings cannot be warranted, in relevant cases, in an attitude whose content they do not minimally understand (comprehend), at least for any warrants and attitudes that depend on understanding. Any interpretation or questioning of one's thoughts or words must presume a comprehension of content in terms of which those activities of questioning are carried out. Raising questions without ground is rationally capricious. So such beings have a rational entitlement to unquestioned reliance on comprehension of their thoughts and words, unless there is reason to question the nature or quality of that comprehension.

This account of our entitlement derives purely from conditions for thought of certain rational beings. Sense-perceptual experience is not epistemically relevant. Those entitlement to the presumption of this comprehension is non-sense-perceptual. All this, notwithstanding the fact that comprehension depends on sense experience for its genesis, and may be subject to questioning, interpretation, and even revision.¹⁴

Traditionally, the view that apriori warrants derive from understanding was applied to understanding of thought contents. I will assume that comprehension of one's idiolect is subject to substantially the same points about entitlement that I have just made.

I conjecture that interpretation requires justification, not merely entitlement. The justification need not be conscious. But to be warranted,

an interpretation must be backed by grounds or evidence available on reflection to the interpreter. The warrant for most interpretation is empirical. As I shall later note, some such warrant can be apriori.

I have argued that questions of warrant for attitudes of certain rational beings require presuming a starting point in comprehension. One is apriori pro tanto entitled to rely upon comprehension of one's own thoughts and language, unless reason for doubt arises.

I turn now to warrants for understanding others. I want to discuss three questions. First, in domestic communication that depends on constant linguistic understanding and that does not require contextual supplementation or correction, is the understanding of another's speech always interpretation? Or is it often comprehension? I will take the answer to hinge on a second, closely related question: Are we ever entitled to rely on our presumptive understanding of another person without evidence or justification? If the answer is affirmative, our understanding of others' speech is like our perceptual beliefs and our understanding of our own thoughts and speech, in that we have a prima facie entitlement that requires of us no justificatory inference or evidence, however unconscious. I have already signalled my answers to these two questions. But I wish to develop these answers more fully. Third, if understanding another is sometimes comprehension, is the entitlement always empirical, as our entitlement to our perceptual beliefs is? Or is the entitlement sometimes apriori or non-sense-perceptual, as our entitlement to rely on first-person comprehension is? I do not hope to answer these questions decisively here. But I want to

engage them. Let me begin with the second.

Can one ever reasonably presume, as a defeasible default position, that one comprehends what others say?¹⁵ Is the warrant for such understanding ever an entitlement that requires no evidence or justification? I assume that there is always some unconscious psychological transformation from perception of words to understanding. I question whether, if the understanding is to be warranted, the perceptual basis for the transformation must provide evidence for that understanding. Similarly, I assume that in learning words, one's understanding is formed through associating behavior, words, and objects in the physical world. I question whether the understanding's being warranted requires that these associations justify the understanding through evidential relations, or inferences to the best explanation, or coherence with antecedent beliefs.

There seems little intuitive ground to think that evidence of these sorts is needed to support untrammelled domestic understanding. Not only are we not conscious of inferences. In most cases, explicating the justifications is well-nigh impossible--not only for ordinary speakers, but even for philosophers. Barring anomaly, understanding an interlocutor's speech, on ordinary topics, seems no less immediate than understanding one's own speech in thinking outloud.

These points are not decisive. One could postulate fast, unconscious inferences. There are psychologically relevant transformations. But these are mostly not person-level inferences. Moreover, the postulation would have to show some advantage in accounting for epistemic warrant. For it has

no intuitive plausibility for ordinary understanding.

I am impressed with analogies to epistemically non-inferential epistemic abilities. As with perception, and comprehension of one's own speech, the processes underlying domestic understanding of others are fast, unconscious, difficult to articulate, nearly automatic, almost modular, and very reliable in ordinary contexts. Inferences relevant to epistemology are acts in the central cognitive system, though often unconscious ones. They are acts by the individual, not processes in subsystems. The transformations present in these three cases normally do not involve acts by individuals.

One reason why it is unreasonable to see ordinary perception as warranted by an inference from evidence about sensations or perceptual presentations to a conclusion about physical properties derives from the degree to which sensations are not an object of cognitive focus. The function of the central perceptual systems (especially vision, touch, and hearing) is to facilitate the individual's interaction with the physical world. For higher animals it is to enable the individual to form reliable beliefs about physical objects and properties. Probably only critically rational beings conceptualize sensations or perceptual representations involved in perception of physical properties--conceptualize them as distinct from the physical properties they indicate. They come to do so long after they have warranted perceptual beliefs about physical properties. Moreover, memory of the properties of sensations or perceptual representations, in ordinary perception of physical objects or properties,

is less reliable and more ephemeral than memory of the physical items perceived. These points tell against taking the primary warrant for perceptual beliefs as an inference from properties of sensations. The sensations or perceptions are psychological stepping stones which once negotiated sink out of sight. They and beliefs about them are not ground-level evidential bases for perceptual beliefs.

I think that similar considerations tell against treating ordinary domestic understanding of others' speech as an inference starting with observations about words or behavior. Understanding depends on perceptual awareness and implicit memory of words in something like the way that perception depends on utilization of sensations or perceptual representations in forming perceptual beliefs. But forming beliefs about the properties of words is no more the aim of understanding than forming beliefs about sensations or perceptions is the aim of perception. Understanding of speech may well precede an ability to conceptualize and form beliefs about a distinction between words and the objects they indicate or the meanings they convey. It is well known that memory of the properties of words is less reliable and more ephemeral than memory of what one understands through the words. These considerations suggest that our warrant for understanding others' words in domestic cases does not rest on inferences involving beliefs about words as such.

A further ground for doubting the empirical theorizing model for domestic understanding rests on how we reason about justification in this domain. When communication runs smoothly, the question of justifying one's

understanding does not seem to arise. It is no more in place to ask someone who is a perfectly competent language user to support his or her presumed understanding of someone who says "push-button telephones are more common than rotary ones" than it is to ask a normal perceiver how he or she justifies a perceptual belief that that is a brown lectern, when he or she is looking at one in a good light. These questions about warrant are philosophers' questions. Addressing them well requires giving weight to the fact that they do not arise in that form in ordinary life.

Normal perception and perceptual belief involves a default warrant (an entitlement) that requires no justification from the individual. Justification is required only when specific difficulties arise. If the light is bad, one may need to justify one's attribution of a color. If holograms are afoot, one may need to justify a belief that it is a lectern rather than a hologram. But then specific alternatives are relevant and threatening.¹⁶ In the absence of such alternatives, one's warrant resides in one's being a well-functioning perceiver and having the perceptual experiences. Being a perceiver involves having a perceptual system formed through reliable connection with entities categorized by the perceptual representations of the system. To be warranted in perceptual beliefs, one need not be able fully to conceptualize the warrant. One needs no justification or evidence in any space of reasons available to reflection (or even "unconsciously").

Similar points apply to domestic understanding. Linguistic training gives one a reliable understanding of what others' say. Status as a competent understander and normal use of

associated conceptual apparatus yields a defeasible warrant that obviates the need for evidence or justification. Justification is needed only when anomalies arise, or when one cannot rely on the transformations afforded by presumptive overlap with one's own idiolect. It is not a from-the-beginning open question what someone else says, if a reliable understander presumes on seeming immediate understanding. The understander is prima facie entitled to immediate presumptive understanding.¹⁷

Our usage does diverge from that of our fellows. People need not use words in the same way in order to communicate. But in normal communities, except where divergences appear to occur, there is no rational ground for departing from, or having to justify, the presumption of comprehension. A person's use of words could diverge from others' so completely as to leave no overlap. Then the person would be unable to comprehend others' speech and would have to rely on interpretation. But this no more shows that the epistemology of our actual situation centers on interpretation, as opposed to comprehension, than the fact that an individual could be placed in a world where perceptual inclinations could not be trusted, and had always to be double checked, shows that actual perception is epistemically dependent on inference and checking. Warrant for comprehension in the domestic case derives from contingent facts about reliability in a given social environment.

So my answer to the second question is that one's warrant for understanding others' speech and writing is commonly an entitlement, not based on evidence, inference, or coherence. My answer to the first question

is that understanding others in domestic cases is often comprehension, not interpretation.

What of the third question? Is all such entitlement empirical, as our entitlement to perceptual beliefs is? Or is one sometimes entitled through some non-empirical warrant to understanding of another's speech, as one is entitled to rely on comprehension of one's own thoughts and words? I think that the basic entitlement is sometimes non-sense-perceptual, non-empirical.¹⁸ The entitlement derives from one's status as a competent understander, and from the conceptual aspects of understanding. Sense-perception is necessary for this understanding; but the warrant need not lean on it for justificational force.

I believe that we have a general apriori pro tanto entitlement to rely on understanding of others' words that are immediately prima facie intelligible to us. In certain circumstances, we can be apriori defeasibly entitled to comprehension of what others say in particular cases when what they say is immediately prima facie intelligible to us. The justificational force of the entitlement derives from the role of understanding in intellection. It rests on no epistemic underpinning from perception.

One reason for my view is that comprehending standing, conceptual aspects of one's own thought and idiolect is itself, as a matter of psychological and sociological fact, normally dependent on having comprehended thoughts (one's own) that were shaped and expressed through the words of others. Even innate non-linguistic concepts are commonly associated with one's words only via understanding them as expressed by

others' words. So homophonic comprehension of one's own words is normally interwoven with homophonic understanding of others'. So it cannot in general provide a prior framework for empirically grounded third-person understanding. This is a primary source of reliability in understanding others. Our reliability derives from the fact that understanding others to a large degree constitutes the nature of comprehension of our own idiolects, the entitlement to which is clearly a priori.

This is not a traditional private language argument. It does not depend on a claim that we metaphysically must begin with others' speech. The point is that that is how we do begin--and probably psychologically must begin. Epistemic norms arise out of actual situations of reliability and interdependence--rather as the norms for perceptual warrant center on facts about what is reliable in the environment that the perceiver is embedded in. There is no metaphysical necessity that the perceiver be in an environment that makes perception reliable (though one's perceptual system must have been formed in such an environment). Entitlements to both perception and comprehension rest on contingent, external reliabilities outside the control and perhaps even ken of the individual.

Here is not the place to explore differences between my and Davidson's views on the role of the social in linguistic understanding. It is, however, worth indicating where the chief difference lies. Davidson thinks that to have the concept of belief, and even to have beliefs at all, an individual must actually enter into a communication-interpretation relation with another language user. Actual social relations are necessary to

thinking--not merely psychologically necessary but metaphysically necessary, or necessary in whatever way that goes with Davidson's apriori arguments for his view.¹⁹ I do not accept these claims. I think that it is metaphysically possible for an individual to have beliefs without language (in fact, higher animals are actual examples), to have language without social relations, and to have the concept of belief without social relations.

I think it metaphysically necessary that certain attitudes, given certain facts about the individual, depend for their intentional content on relations that they bear to others' uses of language. The individual need not be in those relations to think. But to think thoughts he does think, given his actual intentions, relations to others, and limits on background knowledge, the individual (metaphysically) must have been in those relations. I locate the social dependence of mental states at a less global level than Davidson does. The necessities in my account depend on contingent parameters' being fixed.²⁰

Suppose that we could not perceive words others speak. Suppose that the stimulus effects of the words nevertheless affected us by some natural causal process in such a way that we reliably understand their sense and their being used assertively, interrogatively, and so on, as received--rather than as initiated. Suppose that we could not directly know or even reliably guess anything about the words whose effects were thus injected. Suppose that the word sounds in the relevant contexts called up understanding of conceptual content and assertive force by bypassing the

perceptual system, but triggering the same central mechanisms by which we understand our own speech. Thus I comprehend the interlocutor's conceptual content and assertive mode without perceiving words, as long as the communicator is using words in the ways I use them. The words might become perceptible when but only when something in the context provides grounds to doubt the standing comprehension of what the interlocutor is saying. Understanding, however, remains as good as ever.

In such a case, much of what we know in communication would, of course, be lost. But I think that the basic entitlement underlying understanding communication of intentional content and assertive mode, in ordinary domestic cases, would in its fundamentals be unchanged. Our starting point in domestic understanding is a non-sense-perceptual entitlement to rely understanding of what one's system takes as immediately or non-inferentially intelligible. The warrant for relying on the apparent intelligibility can stand on its own. It need not lean on sense-experience of words or behavior, once a system of language-comprehension is developed.

In the injection case, we would lose access to empirical evidence for inference and interpretation. But such interpretation is not epistemically basic. Unreasoned putative comprehension of the interlocutor's thought content and force is basic. The role of words and intonation is to call up the conceptual mechanisms that make comprehension possible. In basic cases, they are not objects of cognition which serve as evidence, or even indispensable sources of warrant for comprehending the intentional content and basic illocutionary force of others' intentional acts.²¹

A presupposition of this argument is that non-inferential sense-perceptual beliefs are warranted through a distinctively empirical, sense-perceptual entitlement. The entitlement derives its force not merely from the reliability of the beliefs' connection to their subject matters, but also from the beliefs' depending systematically for their content and application on the way perceptual objects are presented through sense perception. Some might deny this. They might maintain that all beliefs that depend at all for their warrant on reliable causal "tracking" connections to their subject matters have the same epistemic status. I believe that such a position would be seriously mistaken. It ignores what is distinctive about empirical warrant and runs together the very different contributions to the internal aspects of warrant made respectively by the systems of sense-perception and understanding. These are, however, topics for another occasion.

I have not discussed context-dependent aspects of linguistic understanding except as a foil to standing aspects. The warrant for understanding perceptually guided demonstratives would seem to be empirical. Indeed, most of the warrant for fully comprehending utterances about objects on display, in the here and now, will be empirical all the way down. But not all context-dependent elements in an intentional content require empirical elements in the understanding. Establishing certain tense parameters can normally rely on a rule working directly off the comprehension of the intentional act. The referent of the first-person pronoun, as used by someone else, is fixed as the author of the comprehended

act. Similarly, certain context-dependent parameters surely have default readings that are fixed by comprehension of the language. The language is context-sensitive in being systematically open to having the default reading overturned by background knowledge. (The background knowledge could be non-linguistic and empirical. But it could also be associated purely with comprehension of prior elements of the discourse.) Lacking special information, the contextually vulnerable default readings stand. I understand "red hair" normally to apply only to hair that in its natural state, in normal light, looks more like certain orange objects than most red objects. But empirical background knowledge in certain contexts could require that one understand that the phrase applies to hair that looks blood-red in normal light because it is painted, and not to hair normally counted "red". So although much contextual resolution of contextual-dependent elements in discourse is empirical, some depends on default settings associated with comprehension. Some depends on reasoning from comprehension of prior discourse.

Similar points apply to comprehending context-dependent elements of language whose understanding turns on the speaker's intended force. Understanding conversational implicature requires reasoning that goes beyond linguistic comprehension. The supplemental considerations will commonly be empirical. Certain simple types of irony can, however, be comprehended using standing linguistic competence: a certain tone might mark irony, and the marker might be comprehended through a standing linguistic competence--very much like the way that normal cases of serious assertion can be

comprehended. Then a simple, standing transformation on the standard meaning might yield understanding (even comprehension) of the irony. In other cases, understanding that irony is in play might require subtle empirical background knowledge; and the reinterpretation of the sentence might require ingenuity that goes well beyond automatic application of standing linguistic competences.

Although much interpretation is justified through perceptual beliefs, not all justificational force behind interpretation is sense-perceptual. Some interpretation rests on making a message as coherent as possible, or on prior comprehension. Insofar as such interpretation does not rely on empirical inference or on perceived elements in the context, its justification might be non-sense-perceptual.

Thus four combinations seem possible: apriori, non-sense-perceptual entitlement to comprehension; entitlement to comprehension that is partly sense-perceptual; apriori, non-sense-perceptual justification of interpretation; and justification of interpretation that is partly sense-perceptual. As noted, I am inclined to believe that interpretation must rest upon justification rather than entitlement.

I have claimed a fundamental symmetry in epistemic status between comprehension of standing aspects of our own thought contents and comprehension of similar aspects of our interlocutors'. Yet Davidson is clearly right in maintaining that there are significant asymmetries. What asymmetries do I acknowledge?

The question leads into fascinating issues about self-knowledge and

knowledge of other minds. The issues are complex. But some simple points of agreement can be cited. First, whenever we use a word with a definite meaning, we can meaningfully but trivially disquote. We cannot misidentify the meaning of our words or the intentional content of our thoughts. We can get them wrong only in the sense that our explications of them, or inferential associations with them, can be mistaken. But although we are apriori prima facie entitled to our seeming-, homophonic comprehension of another person's words in the absence of reasonable doubt, we can in any given case question our homophonic comprehension of another's speech, without doubting that the speech has a definite meaning.

Second, we can utilize self-interpretation to doubt commitments associated with the comprehension of our words or thoughts; but we cannot treat all our words or thoughts and their associated commitments as objects of interpretation. By contrast, we can take all of another's words as objects of interpretation. We can view another person as a foreigner, or even a black box. But we cannot view ourselves purely that way.

But the fact that we can, and sometimes have to, view others as foreigners to be interpreted does not indicate that we always must, or always do, or even rationally can, given our actual situations, view others that way all of the time. I think that fundamental to the social character of language is the fact that the norm within domestic communication is content preservation. We comprehend another's content without interpretation. We are entitled to take others as linguistic fellows rather than as objects of interpretation unless reasons arise for doubting our

comprehension. For all their substantial philosophical virtues in other respects, radical interpretation and radical translation are misleading models for the epistemology of communication. Linguistic community provides epistemic norms in communication despite the wonderfully multifarious ways--including linguistic ways--in which we are individuals.

---Tyler Burge

Footnotes

* I gave an earlier version of this paper at Rutgers University in 1993 on a week-long panel with W.V. Quine and Donald Davidson. I am grateful to both for comments that improved the paper, and to Davidson for pointing me to work of his that improved my understanding of his views. I have benefited from giving the paper at Brandeis, and at Harvard as the first of two Santayana Lectures, in the Fall of 1998. Bob Nozick, Hilary Putnam, and David Wong made comments on these two occasions that led to improvements.

1. Cf. my "Content Preservation" The Philosophical Review 102 (1993), pp. 457-488; W.V. Quine, Word and Object (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1960), chapter 2; Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984), chapters 9-12.
2. W.V. Quine, Ontological Relativity (New York, Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 46; Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation" in Inquiries, op. cit., p. 125.
3. Quine, "Speaking of Objects" Ontological Relativity op. cit., p. 5.
4. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation" Inquiries, op. cit., p. 125,128.
5. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation", Inquiries, ibid, p. 125; "The Structure and Content of Truth", The Journal of Philosophy 87 (1990), pp. 324f, esp. note 67. Cf. also "Belief and the Basis of Meaning", Inquiries, op. cit., p. 141.
6. Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" in Truth and Interpretation, Lepore ed. (Basil Blackwell, New York, 1986), p. 438.
7. I do not accept Davidson's claim that to have beliefs one must understand (in the sense of conceptualize) the possibility of being mistaken, hence that to have a belief one must have the concepts of truth and falsity. Cf. "Thought and Talk" in Inquiries, op. cit., p.170.
8. This point suggests that Quine's account of translation, which shares many basic features with Davidson's account of interpretation, may also be a contribution to psychology. The pleasant irony does not escape me.
9. The analog to such context-dependence in the perceptual case is not immediately salient. Here is a case. A certain type of visual perception might never in itself distinguish for the individual between two sorts of object, only one of which is what the individual's perceptual apparatus and reaction system has evolved to discern. The individual is then not entitled to rely on visual perception alone to yield a warranted justified perceptual belief. Perhaps vision must be supplemented by touch, or the word of an adult, to yield a warranted perceptual belief. Young monkeys cannot distinguish different types of eagles, as seen from below, only some of which are predators. They give predator calls for all of them. But their escaping action is often contextually

dependent on the further predator call of an adult (which can make the distinctions). The adult in effect provides needed confirmation of youth's perception of a given bird as a member of a predator species. The example is suggestive regardless of whether one thinks, as I do, that monkeys have warranted perceptual beliefs, with (roughly) the content of "there is a predator up there". Cf. Cheney and Seyarath, How Monkeys See the World (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 129ff.

10. Grice identified the key epistemic feature of conversational implicatures: one's understanding has to be "worked out" from contextual considerations, rather than inferred "intuitively" from meaning or constant understanding. Paul Grice, Studies in the Way of Words (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 28-31.

11. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" op. cit. I believe that Davidson underrates the role of shared linguistic framework in communication. He calls it "an enormous convenience" (p. 438) that many people speak in similar ways. He maintains that in principle communication "does not demand that any two people speak the same language". I think that this latter is true. But it does not follow that an account of the epistemology of communication can dispense with presumptions about overlapping linguistic frameworks and competences. Davidson points out that the linguistic elements that are shared are not sufficient to enable one to understand all that is said, and that one can expect variations in what is shared from one speaker to another (p. 444). He seems to infer from these points that shared linguistic frameworks do not characterize a communicator's linguistic competence. But no one ever thought that such frameworks did the whole job of characterizing linguistic competence, and variations are easy to allow on the presumption of substantial overlap.

12. Wittgenstein famously, though with characteristic obscurity, insisted on a related distinction in his dictum "There is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation". Cf. Investigations 201. Michael Dummett, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking" in Truth and Interpretation, op. cit. cites Wittgenstein and criticizes Davidson's treatment of communication as involving interpretation. Dummett does not note an important difference between Davidson's conception of interpretation and Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein sees an interpretation as a substitution of one linguistic expression for another. Davidson's conception of interpretation is decidedly not one of relating words to words. My conception of interpretation makes no use of this point of Wittgenstein's. I do not assume that my conception of interpretation is Davidson's, but I think that it is strongly suggested by his interpretation model.

13. Interpreting something for someone else may involve conveying an interpretation that one could oneself simply comprehend. This is a different use of "interpret" than the one I focus upon.

14. I have discussed these matters further in "Content Preservation", op. cit. and "Interlocution, Perception, and Memory" Philosophical Studies 86 (1997), pp. 21-47.

15. Davidson writes, "Speakers of the same language can go on the assumption that for them the same expressions are to be interpreted in the same way, but this does not indicate

what justifies the assumption. All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation" "Radical Interpretation", Inquiries, op. cit., p. 125. Davidson seems to suggest here that what justifies the assumption is the evidence for radical interpretation. On my view, the assumption is warranted by an entitlement that need not be supported by any evidence available to the individual. The "evidence" postulated by the theory of radical interpretation need not function as evidence in the individual's warrant for understanding standing aspects of another's speech.

16. For an introduction to the relevant possibilities idea in theory of perception, see Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators" The Journal of Philosophy 67 (1970) pp. 1007-1023; "The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge" Philosophical Studies 40 (1981), pp. 363-378; Knowledge and the Flow of Information (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1981).

17. These claims may be compatible with Davidson's theory, in view of its rational-reconstruction methodology. But I think that Davidson's emphasis on seeking evidence that enables us to deal with "the general case" (cf. the passage cited at notes 4 and 15) tends to ignore the restrictions on relevant possibilities and the obviation of the need for evidence that come with an individual's being contingently embedded in a relatively homogeneous speech community. Similarly, Davidson's emphasis on cases, such as malapropisms, in which standing understanding becomes problematic tends to suggest that because of the possibility of non-standard cases, evidence is always needed. Cf. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" in Truth and Interpretation, op. cit., esp. pp. 442-443. But we need evidence only when such cases threaten the presumption, warranted for competent understanders, that we understand what we seem to understand.

18. I have argued for these claims in "Content Preservation", op. cit. and in "Interlocution, Perception, and Memory" Philosophical Studies op. cit., pp. 21-47. In cases where we have a non-empirical entitlement to comprehension of others' speech, we may simultaneously have other entitlements or justifications that are empirical.

19. Davidson, "Thought and Talk" in Inquiries, op. cit., p. 170; "Three Varieties of Knowledge" in A.J. Ayer Memorial Essays, A. Phillips Griffiths ed. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991); "Rational Animals" Dialectica 36 (1982), pp. 317-327; "The Social Aspect of Language" in The Philosophy of Michael Dummett, McGinness and Oliveri eds. (Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1994).

20. Burge, "Individualism and the Mental" Midwest Studies IV (1979), pp. 73-121; "Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind" The Journal of Philosophy 83 (1986), pp. 697-720; "Wherein is Language Social?" in Reflections on Chomsky, George ed. (Blackwell, Oxford, 1989). Davidson criticizes some of my arguments in "Knowing One's Own Mind" in Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 60 (1987); and "Epistemology Externalized" Dialectica (1991), pp. 191-202. He makes some important points, but I am not persuaded by the criticisms. I will not answer them here. Davidson is mistaken in attributing to me the view that "speaking in the "socially accepted" way is essential to verbal communication." Cf. "The Social Basis of Meaning", op. cit. Moreover, I do not take social anti-individualism to explain the essence of communication.

21 Clearly the argument for the apriority of first-person comprehension is different from the argument for the apriority of third-person comprehension, as applied to the speech of others. The former is a transcendental argument. The non-empiricality of the warrant for first-person comprehension is a necessary condition for the possibility of any warranted comprehension, or comprehended thought, at all. The argument for the apriority of third-person comprehension yields only a prima facie warrant, allows for brute error, and adverts to contingent, reliable causal processes between the understanding and the event that is understood. Although they attribute different sub-species of apriority, the arguments agree in attributing a warrant whose justificational force is independent of the contributions of sense-experience or sense-perceptual beliefs. That is the sense in which both first- and third-person comprehension can be apriori warranted.